

788 the chest. The church is then "saluted" by kissing the wall, a ceremony called "sälam" in Geez. If the person wears sandals, he must remove them before entering the church itself.

[211] On the path near the church, or leading to it, there is often a conical pile of small rocks. This may indicate a church on a nearby hilltop, and this pile, "mäsalämiya", functions then as a poster of salutation. If the passerby is in a hurry on another errand, he may simply bow deeply in the direction of the church instead of going there to kiss the wall. In modern times truck-drivers will bow in that direction without stopping.

794 The individual layman usually belongs to a private sodality that holds private communion together. But he may, more informally, invite some personal friends on his personal Saint's day, especially his namesake's. Since this informal private communion is cheaper, costing only the price of a jar of beer and some roasted grain, it is more popular among the poor than the formal "mähabber" sodality. The informal private communion, called "zekert", is shared only by men, uses no drummer, no expensive wheat bread, no collection for a common purse, and usually only the personal confessor is invited from among the priesthood. But the zekert cannot be used as a means of gaining social prestige.

795 e) religious Syncretism.

Surrounded by Muslim and "Jagan" religions, and

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Transportation of messages, until the recent installment of telegraph, was by messenger, and still is to a considerable extent. In the past, the king or governor would send an official messenger, ("melekt satta") with the message wedged tightly in a cleft stick carried above the head while running, which assured safety to the runner.

Proclamation of decrees was and sometimes still is drummed out at the public market place, and only in the capital are public radio loudspeakers utilized. These decrees are heard in respectful silence, though unpopular decrees might, among Amhara, be followed by a delayed "murmuring", which, in the past, often led to local rebellions. Spies of the government listen on such occasions to learn public opinion (astäyayät") in time.

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Landmarks "for memory" are encountered frequently, and they partly take the place of inscribed monuments of cultures of greater literacy. Commemorative monuments in the countryside, called "mäsaläniya", take the form of conical piles of rocks, to which passersby add small rocks, so that one grows sometimes until no one remembers what the original event was. It may have been a battle, or the resting place of a saint. There are no name inscriptions, this being sometimes purposely avoided to prevent an evil spirit such as buda from fastening onto the name and doing harm.

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To insure precision of communication in matters of culture focus, e.g. in religious communication, a combination of pictures and written words is used. This has developed the ancient comic-strip-type of illustration of religious scenes, mainly biblical, hagiological, and Abyssinian-National, found in canvas paintings on the walls of churches. The words spoken by the character are written into the empty space near the mouth. The scenery is starkly realistic. The style shows fierce concentration on the event depicted, without irrelevant background scenery; naivete, but body positions shown with realistic gusto.

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Aksum, monoliths

Phot. R. E. Cheesman

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Aksum, King's coronation throne and four pillars, Abunas' throne in background
(Facing p. 13)

Phot. R. E. Cheesman

ETHIOPIAN HIGHLANDS

13

speaking peoples, who have contributed such an important element to the populations of the Mediterranean basin.¹

I believe that the early civilized world of the valleys: Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus, which has been revealed by the researches and explorations of the last century had its background in the great ranges from which its peoples came. Professor Toynbee has pointed out that the regions of the Nile and the Mesopotamian valleys must have been areas of unhealthy swamp and wilderness when men first settled there.² Such terrain would not produce the conditions necessary to stimulate the multiplication of an indigenous stock: A terrain of this type would rather need clearing and developing by immigrants forced to find their living there after having been driven down from mountain areas by the pressure of increased numbers on food, which we have seen is a common characteristic of mountain economy. But just as the Highland migrant working in the field of American industrialism soon acquires new techniques and develops a higher standard of material culture than his brother who remains a crofter in Scotland, so the colonists of the Nile and Mesopotamian valleys far outpaced in material culture the inhabitants of the remote highlands of Ethiopia or of the Zagros and the Taurus.

There is one last point: the eighteenth-century prejudice against mountains, which influence still remains, tended to an exaggeration of the difficulties of mountain travel in primitive times. Yet the higher ridges of mountain chains often are the easiest lines of movement for men on foot. It makes possible the avoidance of forested valleys and ravines blocked by undergrowth and full of fevers. In England even our earliest forebears kept to the Downlands and trudged along the ridges to keep clear of the thick undergrowth and swamps of the low ground. And the so-called Alpine peoples kept to the mountain belt as they penetrated westward into Europe from the Highlands of Asia Minor through the Balkans to the Alps and the Pyrenees.

In this connection it is possible to appreciate the essential importance of Aksum as an early cultural centre. Aksum is at the northern head of the route along the great Eastern Escarpment which leads into the heart of the Ethiopian Highland; at the same time Aksum is within easy reach of the Red Sea and the affluents which lead down to the Nile valley. There is a theory that the monoliths at Aksum are in fact the remains of a great Megalithic centre; the historic Aksumites merely made their own sculptural additions to the stone monuments which they already found in situ.³ If we accept this theory we can see Aksum as a great centre of early megalithic culture having its connections with the reputed megalithic remains noted by recent Italian travellers in the region of the southern lakes.

¹ Abbé Moré, 'Histoire de l'Ethiopie,' vol. 1. Ethiopia was a term applied by ancient writers loosely and varying to all the northern half of Africa between the Atlantic and the Red Sea, and the term was even extended to Caucasian Colchis and to India. In fact mythical Ethiopia covered all that width of Africa and Asia where the Neolithic cultures first appeared. In classical times the name Ethiopia was applied to Nubia and the Sudan and it was only in post-Christian times that it was limited to the Highland area of modern Ethiopia.

² A. Toynbee, 'The study of history,' vols. 1/2.

³ Sir E. H. W. Budge, chapter on Aksum in vol. II 'History of Ethiopia.'

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